

**Matthew 11:16 - 19, 25 - 30**

**Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 9A**

**July 9, 2023**

**The Rev. Katherine Bush**

I'm only about halfway through Abraham Varghese's new epic novel, The Covenant of Water, so if you've finished it - please don't tell me anything. In the early pages, though, there's a description of something called a burden stone. It's the opposite of what it sounds like. In pre-colonial India, they stacked a horizontal lintel stone across two supports, usually other tall stones like pillars. "These crude structures stand like primitive monuments along well-traveled footpaths, allowing a traveler to ease their heavy headload onto the horizontal slab and rest for a while." In the story, a group of boys has pulled the burden stone down, planning to leave it collapsed as a prank. Our narrator imagines the consequences. "She pictures Shamuel returning from the mill, balancing a sack of ground rice flour on his head, anticipating the burden stone where he can bend his knees just enough to slide the sack onto the horizontal slab. He would be forced to go on [now], or else to drop the sack and wait until someone came by to help lift it back onto his head. In a land where most everything is transported in this manner, where roads are regularly washed away or too rutted for bullock carts, and where only the footpaths are reliable, a rest station like this is a blessing."

We don't live in a time or a place where physical headloads are a part of our daily labor. I've never attempted to carry anything on my head unless it was part of a balance game. Perhaps some of you have traveled or experienced this otherwise common form of transport. Regardless of whether you've witnessed or carried a sack of rice flour on your head, I bet you've carried a heavy mental load before - maybe you are carrying one today. We carry all kinds of things around with us, toting grief, worry, and anger; not all of the things we bear are burdensome, we have hope and love packed in there somewhere too, though even those can feel costly at times.

Transporting all this with us from place to place can be exhausting, and today we encounter a road sign for a rest stop. "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." This is an invitation to us, yet it's buried amidst some cryptic remarks and a harsh critique. The invitation is embedded in a difficult passage of text, just as surely as the invitation is embedded in the difficult pathways we move through in our lives.

We could keep driving at interpretation and context, trying to figure out what John the Baptist was about and whether we're supposed to be dancing or mourning. Or we might wonder if we're just like the doomed generation. And there's work to be done to comprehend the revealing of the Father by the Son. Just as there's much attention to be paid to the swirl of news and heartache, reckoning with past personal stories and shared histories. We could spend our days looking anxiously toward an uncertain future. Or, just for a little while, we could stop at the bend in the road and set our headload on the burden stone. "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

The effort involved in following Jesus is real. He will ask much of us, challenging us to live and move in ways that come with a cost. And Jesus also offers us the opportunity to pause. We are not forced to go on without stopping. \ And there are so many places and ways to lean: in prayer, in conversation with a faithful friend, in the respite of worship, in quiet, in song, in sabbath. Can you take a moment to imagine this lift, how it would feel in your soul and body to shift your burden onto a burden stone, to let the scaffold hold what you've been holding? A gentle lightness returning to your weary body and mind. Can you take a moment to name for yourself where and when and how those places appear in your life? I'll wait.

The Sanskrit word for a burden stone is *sumatanga*, and it has a dual translation into English. A *sumatanga* is a place of rest and of vision. Perhaps implied is the idea that we can see better when we stop and stand still for a bit, setting our headload onto the support of the burden stone. We can see better where we've been and where we're going. You see, that path behind us and ahead of us remains because a burden stone is not an end to the journey. That feels hard to say, that this is but a moment's rest. This lightness is woven into the invitation of Jesus, and there is also a yoke to put on however it fits and weighs. Still, in a world of 24-7 everything - communication, accessibility, news, where off-hours seem less and less respected, it's crucial to remember that rest is real and really offered to each of us.

Perhaps this morning reminds us to look for the off-ramp, for the burden stones. Amid all of the bluster and struggle, part of the message of Christ is that it's okay to sit down and more significantly, to slide the headloads you and I are carrying onto another support and stretch, breathe, and pause for a little while. "In a land where most everything is transported in this manner, where roads are regularly washed away or too rutted for bullock carts, and where only the footpaths are reliable, a rest station like this is a blessing." This morning Jesus reminds us that in a land where the grind to compete and keep up is constant, where we are awash in a sea of input, carrying the headload of too much information and too many stimuli, where the roads are always full of traffic, a rest station like this is a blessing.

These words of blessing are known as the "comfortable words." Though the promise is not an end to discomfort, not an absence of yokes and burdens, rather that we are offered a burden stone, a respite. "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."